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# NATURALIST NOTEBOOK

FEBRUARY 1972

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## FRONT COVER

"TUFTED TITMOUSE AT  
FEEDER"  
*Photo by Mary Lou Treat*

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# **FEBRUARY**

## **THE MONTH OF PATTERN AND FORM**

In his book *The Twelve Seasons*, Joseph Wood Krutch comments that "The most serious charge which can be brought against New England is not Puritanism but February." This seems to be a rather general feeling shared by humans huddling indoors in over-heated rooms, perhaps peering out through falling snow or rain at bare branches against an indistinct gloomy landscape.

A closer look at the shape of the earth, however (which one can take by the simple act of dressing appropriately, opening the door, and walking through it for a tramp in cold fresh air), presents a different aspect. At this season, we are down to essentials in the outdoors. What remains to be seen is, in essence, the bones or skeleton of Nature. The placement of rocks in the landscape stands out distinctly, no longer obscured by shrubs and foliage. The courses of tiny streams overhung by greenery at other times become visible, and the lay of the land is made evident. The eye can follow the meanders and sinuosities by which a brook has cut its path without the visual distraction of concealing plant growth. The pattern of hills, hummocks, and cliffs stands out, too, so that the basic form of the earth is revealed. Sometimes it can be a surprise to find that what we consider a round featureless hill or a flat field actually has craggy rocks and tiny watercourses, hidden before by leafy growth.

Trees and bushes, too, reveal their patterns as they stand in silhouette, leaves fallen. And at a lower level, the lichens, hardly noticed earlier, seem to assume prominence. Against the subdued greys and browns of midwinter, their tiny vivid shapes emerge.

One must acquit February, in all fairness, of being a liability to New England. The truth, as always, bears closer examination. Time spent outdoors during this month, in addition to the obvious health benefits of exercise and fresh air, can provide mental stimulation and appreciation of what lies under the lushness and extravagance of midsummer.

# **TIGER OF THE AIR**

*Text and Photo by  
Frank R. Haeni*

Big Hoot Owl, Cat Owl, and Virginia Owl are but a few of the many names given to the Great Horned Owl, *Bubo virginianus*. Great Horned Owls are found in North America from the northern limit of tree growth south to the Straits of Magellan.

The owls are 20 inches long and have a wing span of up to 55 inches. The usual call is a loud, deep-toned *whoo, hoo-hoo-hoo, whooo*. The owl derives its name from the two large tufts of feathers on its head which resemble horns.

The Great Horned Owl is one of our most powerful birds of prey. It has few, if any, equals in its ability to thrive in almost any environment, even in the face of constant persecution from man.

February is the month when these owls become most active in courting and nest building. The courtship of the Great Horned Owl is a curious performance. The male goes through peculiar contortions, nodding, bowing, and flapping its wings. During all of this performance, he is uttering the most persuasive owl language to his prospective mate.

The nest is usually constructed in the crotch of a tall tree, from twigs, weed stalks, and roots, or the deserted nest of a hawk, crow, eagle or osprey may be used. In some parts of its range, the Great Horned Owl may nest in a cave, on a ledge, or in a hollow tree.

Two to four white eggs are laid during February or March. However, there have been reports of eggs being laid as early as January. The female diligently sits on her nest during the cold snowy days and nights of February and March, often with the snow covering her and her nest.



Once the young hatch out, they remain in the nest for at least a month. During that time they are fed field mice, Norway rats, cottontail rabbits, snowshoe hares, and an occasional chicken or duck. Examination of the pellets found beneath the nest will reveal that muskrats, squirrels, and chipmunks are also eaten. Another item on the owl's menu is the striped skunk. This owl is one of the few predatory animals that will prey upon this aromatic creature of the woodlands.

The Great Horned Owl has earned the reputation of being a chicken killer. The owls will readily snatch chickens if they are found roosting outside of the coop at night. However, this could be avoided by making sure that all chickens roost inside a building after dark.

The female owl weighs 1700 grams and the male weighs 1300 grams. Each bird eats ten per cent of its weight daily. Computing the food requirements of a pair of these owls, they eat nearly 50,000 grams of meat per year per bird. If 90 per cent of the owl's diet consisted of mice, it would eat over 2,750 mice per year. A pair of owls would eat 5,500 mice; and, if the pair had two young, the family would consume 8,250 mice each year! The number of rats, mice, and other rodents that this group of birds destroys each year far outweighs the damage done to a few chickens or other domestic fowl.

Owls swallow small animals of prey such as mice and other rodents in one gulp—fur, bones, and all. These indigestible parts are rolled into a pellet or ball in the stomach and regurgitated a few hours after feeding. Such pellets, as mentioned above, are a clue to what the birds have fed upon.

The Great Horned Owl is nocturnal—active during the dark hours of the night. Two specialized adaptations which allow owls to hunt at night are their eyes and ears. The eyes are very large and capable of sharp focusing at various distances. Also, the eyes are directed forward so that their fields of view overlap. This provides the owls with excellent binocular vision and good depth perception. To see what is behind or beside them, the owls are capable of turning their heads 180 degrees.

Owls' ears are directed forward also. They lie under the facial disc and are much larger than those of any other group of birds.

Until recently, the Great Horned Owl was considered a pest and nuisance; therefore, it was not protected. With the increased awareness and understanding of the feeding habits of the owl, the necessary changes were brought about to protect this beautiful creature of the night.

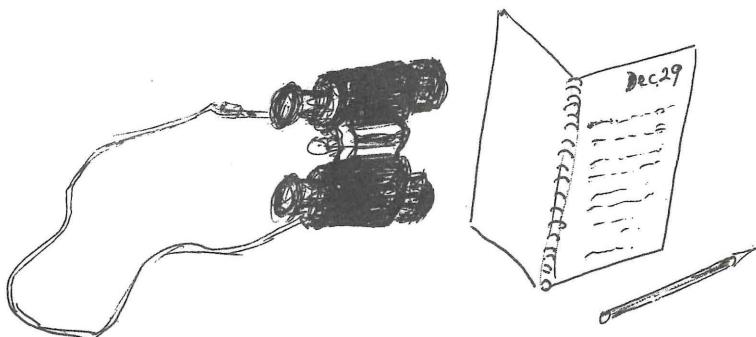
A leafless plant is growing here on this barren rock during these cold February days. It is a *Lichen*, one of the first forms of plant life. It looks grayish on this rock, but Lichens may be white, greenish, brown, orange, yellow, or almost black. Some little Lichens may be found on dead trees and are called British Soldiers because of their red caps.



Others are like pyxie cups or goblets. Lichens are really two plants in one—a union of an alga with a fungus. The fungus absorbs moisture and the alga manufactures food. They cling to rocks and barks of trees and are the hardiest of all plants. When our own world grows cold, Lichens may be the last life to disappear.



# CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT



Annually in December, more than 3,000 bird watchers strategically located all over Canada and the United States select a day during the Christmas season to make the Audubon Christmas Bird Count. This day of special joy and travail to birders has been a feature of the Yule season since 1900, when Dr. Frank Chapman directed the first count in Englewood, New Jersey. This past December was the 72nd annual count. In Connecticut, there were 15 separate counts made.

The original idea behind the Christmas count was to provide a sport to replace gunning. Since the early days, rules have been evolved so that while the competitive element of sport has increased as each team of observers tries to set new records of species and numbers seen, the overall results are also immensely useful to researchers. They are published in *Audubon Field Notes* as a permanent record.

Twenty-nine persons in nine teams, headed by Bob Dewire, made up the group taking the census in the New London area on Wednesday, December 29. They were in the field from before sunrise until darkness fell at the end of a brightly sunny day. There was no snow covering the ground but thin ice on some water with a gusty wind and temperatures between 20 degrees to 40 degrees F.

The total listed of 99 species and 20,269 individuals was less than the 1970 count, which is printed for comparison. A first for the 1971 count, however, was the House Wren, indicated by \*\*. New records for numbers counted are marked by a single\*.

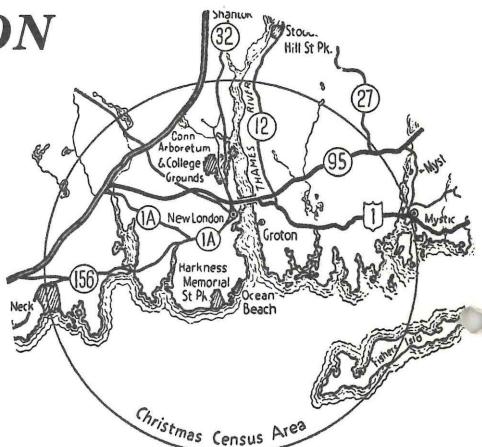
SPECIES	1971	1970	ALL-TIME HIGH
Common Loon	2	5	24
Red-throated Loon	3	7	12
Horned Grebe	50	73	298
Red-necked Grebe	—	1	5
Pied-billed Grebe	9	25	25
Great Cormorant	70	192	192
Great Blue Heron	35	51	51
Black-crowned Night Heron	12	6	20
Mute Swan	187	167	249
Canada Goose	352	429	481
Snow Goose	2	5	8
Mallard	413	1103	1180
Black Duck	470	1164	1707
Gadwall	3	1	5
Green-winged Teal	1	—	1
Baldpate	27	273	273
Redhead	3	3	8
Canvasback	274	224	738
Greater Scaup	96	1197	5358
Common Goldeneye	84	206	821
Bufflehead	539	360	949
Oldsquaw	5	7	18
Common Eider	11	5	56
White-winged Scoter	6	1	79
Surf Scoter	2	17	57
Common Scoter	2	4	4
Hooded Merganser	57	115	180
Common Merganser	—	28	158
Red-breasted Merganser	314	320	3207

SPECIES	1971	1970	ALL-TIME HIGH
Sharp-shinned Hawk	1	1	2
Cooper's Hawk	1	1	2
Red-tailed Hawk	7	8	8
Rough-legged Hawk	—	1	3
Marsh Hawk	1	—	1
Sparrow Hawk	8	9	15
Ruffed Grouse	4	3	5
Bobwhite	32	11	77
Ring-necked Pheasant	5	5	20
Virginia Rail	1	2	2
Coot	68	48	169
Killdeer	3	14	14
Black-bellied Plover	8	10	10
Ruddy Turnstone	15	17	20
American Woodcock	1	—	1
Purple Sandpiper	60	34	139
Dunlin	1	3	8
Black-backed Gull	99	212	212
Herring Gull	6881*	5252	5728
Ring-billed Gull	121	191	290
Laughing Gull	1	—	—
Bonaparte's Gull	48	26	49
Mourning Dove	189	293	478
Great Horned Owl	1	—	1
Long-eared Owl	1	—	1
Short-eared Owl	3*	—	1
Belted Kingfisher	17	20	20
Flicker	4	12	34
Hairy Woodpecker	29	28	33
Downy Woodpecker	88	91	97
Horned Lark	—	7	48
Blue Jay	272	671	671
Common Crow	299	321	353
Black-capped Chickadee	614*	493	576
Tufted Titmouse	177*	146	159
White-breasted Nuthatch	113*	103	103
Red-breasted Nuthatch	8	1	15
Brown Creeper	17*	11	11
Winter Wren	1	1	3
Carolina Wren	4*	—	2
House Wren	1**	—	—

SPECIES	1971	1970	ALL-TIME HIGH
Mockingbird	28*	23	14
Catbird	2	7	7
Brown Thrasher	4	19	20
Robin	14	42	66
Hermit Thrush	3	2	9
Swainson's Thrush	—	1	1
Bluebird	4	9	35
Golden-crowned Kinglet	5	8	8
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	7	3	9
Water Pipit	—	17	17
Starling	3471	6114	6114
Loggerhead Shrike	—	2	2
Myrtle Warbler	9	16	168
Yellow-breasted Chat	1	—	2
Yellowthroat	—	1	1
House Sparrow	705	693	895
Meadowlark	34	51	99
Red-winged Blackbird	57	139	201
Baltimore Oriole	—	1	1
Rusty Blackbird	—	15	175
Common Grackle	164	776	776
Cowbird	899	2357	2406
Cardinal	103	131	208
Evening Grosbeak	440	2	740
Dickcissel	—	1	2
Purple Finch	9	47	141
House Finch	285*	144	152
Pine Siskin	10	1	159
Goldfinch	210	42	234
Towhee	43	73	87
Savannah Sparrow	4	20	50
Vesper Sparrow	—	20	20
Slate-colored Junco	286	424	697
Tree Sparrow	136	235	394
Field Sparrow	48	91	94
White-crowned Sparrow	1	—	9
White-throated Sparrow	175	189	317
Fox Sparrow	15	35	75
Swamp Sparrow	1	9	12
Song Sparrow	123	218	275
Snow Bunting	—	34	61

# FIVE YEARS OF CHRISTMAS COUNTS IN NEW LONDON

Year	Species	Individuals
1967	103	17,926
1968	106	19,682
1969	98	19,474
1970	101	26,040
1971	99	20,269



## MEMBERSHIP

in the Thames Science Center increases daily, but we still need to double the number to enable the Center to operate more effectively.

If you believe the Center should reach more people, send us the name of a potential member, and we will supply the application form.

### Privileges of Membership

Subscription to the *Naturalist Notebook*, our magazine for children and adults + Participation in a wide variety of activities such as Family Nature Jaunts, Field Trips, Junior Curator Program, Nature Films, Bird Banding Demonstrations, Weekday Workshops, and Lecture Programs + Special rates for the Summer Nature Study Day Camp and National Audubon Wildlife Film Lecture Series + A 10% discount at the Museum Shop on all items over \$1, including books, science kits, nature motif gifts, and wild bird and sunflower seed + Your membership supports the preservation of the Peace Sanctuary Nature Preserve in Mystic, maintenance of the Interpretive Museum in New London, and educational programs for schools, youth groups, and special classes + Your membership helps the effort to create a quality environment through education.

## **FROM THE DIRECTOR . . .**

*by Robert S. Treat*

Perhaps the most blatant example of our view of natural resources, our environment, people, and profits is the method of coal production called strip-mining. This "Great American Rip-off" is a relatively new way to mine coal in huge amounts and at enormous profits for coal operators. Strip-mining is the response to three significant developments: (1) the invention of the cyclone furnace; (2) the creation of gargantuan machines which can scoop up 220 cubic yards in one bite and are ten stories high; and (3) the insatiable consumption of electricity, which increases ten per cent every year.

Briefly, strip-mining simply strips off the surface of the earth to reveal the seams of coal. This is accomplished first by cutting a road through woodland so that bulldozers, earth movers, power shovels, and front end loaders can get in. The trees, plants, under-brush, earth, and rock (irreverently called "overburden") are blasted loose and shoved by bulldozers to the edge of the hill. In some cases, an entire hill is decapitated to expose the layers of coal. The big shovels and giant augers come in, going as deep as 185 feet to capture the coal.

The end result is something to behold: whole landscapes are denuded, raped, torn open, and robbed of their beauty, "web of life," and any means of recuperation. The area is ripe for landslides, erosion, and flooding. The exposure of rock and soil releases iron, manganese, and sulfates which combine with water to form corrosive compounds and acids that sterilize streams and poison wells. Homes have been abandoned, roads ruined, and property rights disregarded as "broad form deeds" enable operators (without compensation or liability for damages) to use any means to get the coal, based on agreements with ancestors who had assumed they were granting deep mining rights.

Most of the damage has been done in Appalachia, but it will not stop there. In his recent article in the Sunday *Times* entitled "Appalachia—Like The Flayed Back of a Man," James Branscome points out that it costs a company about 50¢ in wages to produce one ton of strip-mined coal versus \$2.75 a ton for deep-mined coal, and that 77 per cent of the coal that could be mined economically lies west of the Mississippi River. No wonder Humble Oil has just purchased six million tons of strippable coal reserves. The worst is yet to come!

At a recent meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, one group of scientists supported power producers with their claims of technological advances towards new sources of energy. This is exactly the point. If we continue to demand more power, then we send the operators scurrying to dig more. Remember, strip-mining already accounts for 44 per cent of the nation's output; and strip-mined coal now generates one-third of the nation's electric power, with TVA one of the largest users. Dr. Barry Commoner sees things differently. The only thing really abundant in the energy field is the pollution it causes; and while our industrial consumption of electricity has doubled every 14 years, our efficiency has been declining. For example, there has been an increase in aluminum as a substitute for steel; yet aluminum production requires six times the energy per pound that steel does.

Unless we all want to live in a Great American Desert covered with power plants, we have little choice—with limited, finite resources and a growing population—but to *decrease* our power demands. This will confront us with a dilemma, says Commoner, of either curtailing production or using less power in producing the same amount of output. It would cost us 15¢ a month more on our utility bills to banish strip-mining from Appalachia and \$26 million just to save the Coal River watershed in West Virginia and perhaps our standard of living will become simpler. BUT, environmental protection poses a price. It is time to reorder our energy priorities and pay that price.



## **NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE**

WELCOME TO STEPHEN F. RUSCH, new director of the former Pequot-Sepos Wildlife Sanctuary in Mystic, who is actively setting about to reorganize and revitalize the Sanctuary. South-eastern Connecticut needs nature centers, and TSC has offered to help in any way it can.

CONGRATULATIONS TO DR. RICHARD H. GOODWIN and all those who responded to his call to save Ell Pond. This beautiful, unspoiled body of water nestled in the rough ledgy country of western Rhode Island close to the Connecticut line has been preserved.

AND CONGRATULATIONS TO DAN W. LUFKIN, Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection, for his bold stand in behalf of our environment. Such actions as preventing aerial spraying of gypsy moth, reminding users of fuel oil in the State that they must conform to the regulations that no fuel containing sulphur in excess of 1% may be used, and issuing a temporary injunction ordering the City of West Haven to remove or adjust flood gates it had installed so that the tide affected and thereby destroyed the wetlands, suggest there may be some hope for the environment. If you note violations, Mr. Lufkin has indicated his desire to be contacted immediately at the Department of Environmental Protection, State Office Building, Hartford, Connecticut 06115.

NATURE CENTER NEWS, a quarterly published by the National Audubon Society, featured an article on the new Thames Science Center by Director Robert S. Treat. Printed on the first page, the article includes a photograph of the Center and can be found in the January, 1972, issue.

A NEW IDEA FOR WEDDINGS is in the report of one recently held in Florida. Ecology-conscious guests threw birdseed instead of rice or confetti at the newlyweds, and birds removed all traces of the festivity from in front of the church.

NATIONAL AUDUBON CAMPS AND ECOLOGY WORKSHOP registration forms are available at the Center. These excellent camps for adults over 18 are located at Greenwich, Connecticut, Hunt Hill Sanctuary, Wisconsin, and Trail Lake Ranch, Wyoming. Each camp provides first-hand experiences with nature through an integrated sequence of daily field trips. Ecological relationships are stressed rather than classification, identification, or characteristics, although each camp has its specialty. Campers may also take the courses for university credit.

ENVIRONMENTAL BOOK OF THE MONTH: The Center recommends *A Guide to New England's Landscape* by Neil Jorgensen, Barre Publishers, 1971, \$8.50. The New England landscape—its bedrock foundation, its surface features, and its vegetation—is described and illustrated in this informative and original guide.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SECOND ANNUAL GIVING continue to mount, especially with a recent pledge of \$500 from the Northeast Utilities Service Company. In order to release the \$4,000 matching two-to-one gift, we must raise \$8,000 first. If you have not already sent in your contribution, will you do it today? The Center cannot continue its services without your support.

## DECEMBER FIELD NOTES

**CONTRIBUTORS:** Please send or call in your field notes to Frank Haeni at the Center by the last day of the month. We are planning to publish reports by the calendar month rather than the staggered dates formerly followed. This should be more convenient for future reference.

The highlight of the month was the Rare Bird Alert which went out when an immature BALD EAGLE was spotted on Amos Lake in Preston. First noted on December 12 and 13, the bird was observed three times thereafter. Eagles have been seen in other years at times when ice is in the rivers, but this is an especially early observation and unusual in view of the generally prevailing warm weather during December.

**New London, Waterford:** A late PALM WARBLER was seen in Waterford Dec. 12. A variety of birds was observed along the shore, including RING-BILLED and BONAPARTE'S GULLS that stayed the entire month at Ocean Beach, where LAUGHING GULLS were also seen Dec. 12 and Dec. 29. At Harkness two GADWALLS observed Dec. 16 were joined by three more for the rest of the month. A COMMON EIDER also appeared here Dec. 27. Along Lake Konomoc three RED-BREASTED NUTHATCHES and two BROWN CREEPERS were noted Dec. 18 and three BLUEBIRDS feeding on the fruit of a winged sumac Dec. 19. Five HOODED MEGANSERS, eight BUFFLEHEAD, four GOLDENEYES and twenty-five SCAUP represented the waterfowl families; other observations, also on Dec. 19, included a lone PIED-BILLED GREBE and a KESTREL.

**Niantic, the Lymes, Old Saybrook:** RED-WINGED BLACK-BIRDS stayed at a feeder in Old Lyme throughout the month. Two REDHEADS and two CANVASBACKS were in Smith's Cove Dec. 11. Four PINE SISKINS arrived at feeders in Old Lyme on Dec. 15. Two SNOW GEESE were seen in a large flock of CANADA GEESE in East Lyme Dec. 20. A rare RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER was at Otter Cove in Old Saybrook on Dec. 20. A flock of 25 EVENING GROSBEAKS was sighted at the Black Point Beach Club Dec. 27. At Rocky Neck State Park a LONG-EARED OWL was spotted on Dec. 31.

**Norwich, Preston:** Interesting observations include eight CEDAR WAXWINGS, four EVENING GROSBEAKS, and a late WINTER WREN on Dec. 13 in Norwich. On Amos Lake in Preston a BEAVER was seen swimming Dec. 12. A COOPER'S HAWK is frequently in the area and has preyed on some of the feeder birds. A pair of late GREEN-WINGED TEAL was seen Dec. 20 and a singleton on Dec. 26. Two REDPOLLS first appeared at feeders Dec. 22 and PINE SISKINS have been abundant since the last week in December.

**Contributors:** G. Bissell, M. Capizzano, Mrs. C. Chapin, T. DeGange, F. Hendricks, S. Illingsworth, H. Kelsey.

Thames Science Center is actively carrying on a bird banding program. The following have been banded during the month of December:

Rufous-sided Towhee (2)	American Goldfinch (22)
Mourning Dove (2)	Purple Finch (1)
Cardinal (1)	Tree Sparrow (6)
Evening Grosbeak (7)	Song Sparrow (1)
White-breasted Nuthatch (1)	White-throated Sparrow (5)
Tufted Titmouse (3)	Field Sparrow (5)
Black-capped Chickadee (14)	Slate-colored Junco (8)

The bird-banding programs are conducted on Saturdays around the main building. Watch the monthly activity sheets for the date and hour.

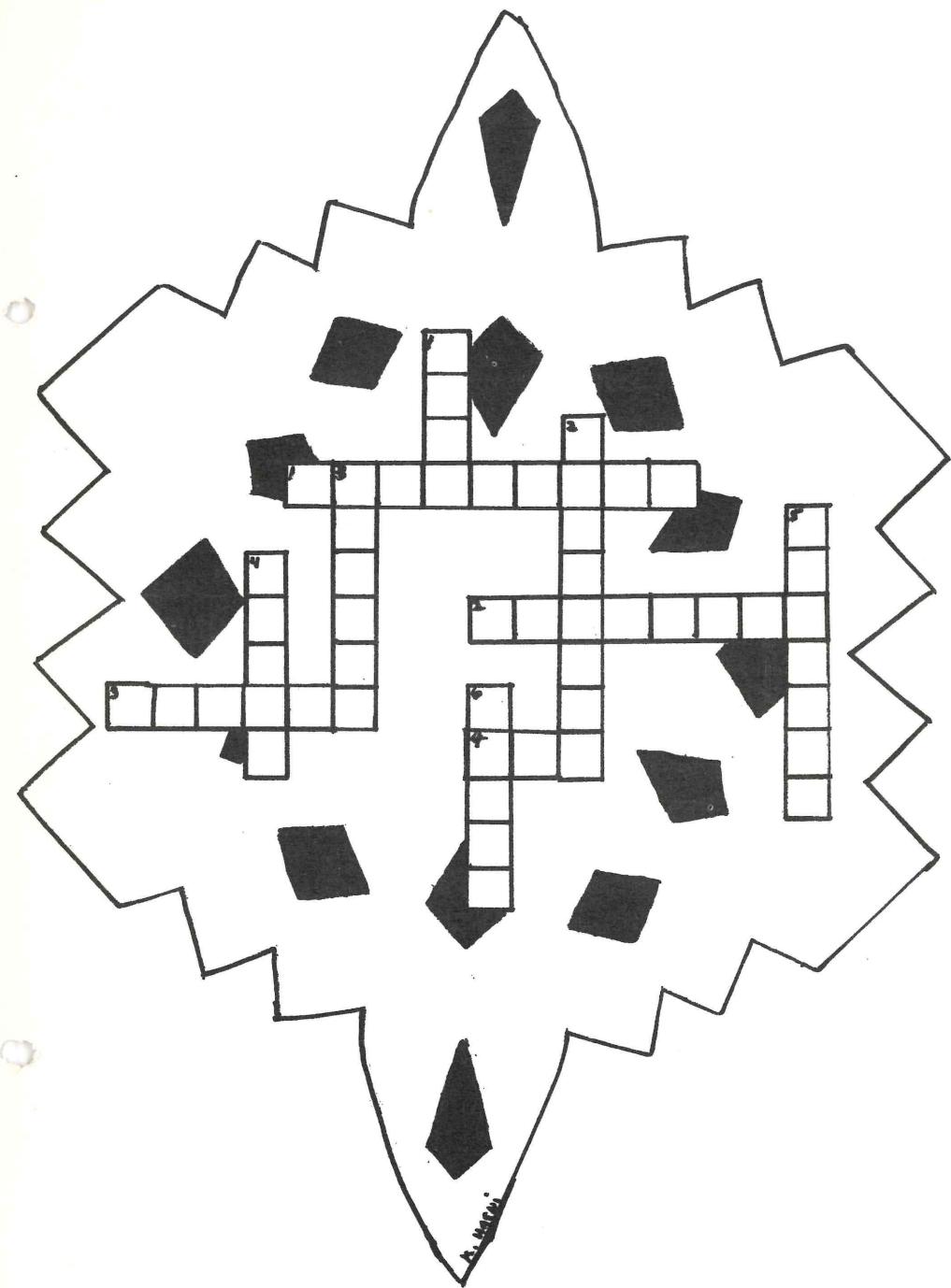
## A WINTER PUZZLE →

DOWN 1-A form of frozen water vapor  
2-A red bird, often found at winter feeders  
3-The universe, and all its phenomena  
4-A slate-and-white bird, often a winter visitor  
5-A form of winter food for birds and animals  
6-Tree with shiny green leaves and red berries

ACROSS 1-One particle of no. 1 DOWN  
2-Large animal of the far North, often seen in herds  
3-A tapering mass of ice formed by dripping water  
4-Large nighttime bird of prey

6-Holly

DOWN 1-Snow, 2-Cardinal, 3-Nature, 4-Junco, 5-Berries,  
ACROSS 1-Snowflake, 2-Reindeer, 3-Icicle, 4-Owl



# NATURALIST NOTEBOOK

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The Thames Science Center is a nonprofit organization seeking a quality environment through education.

The active support of children and adults in the Science Center, its programs, activities and efforts is earnestly solicited.

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**JOSEPHINE S. MERRILL**  
*Editor*

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